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ABSTRACT

The paper reports on interviews with three profoundly deaf, college educated young men who are moderately to very politically active in the deaf community. Responses are grouped into the following categories: political issues; barriers to political participation; and personal perspectives on the attitudes of deaf people. Among issues and needs of the deaf community raised in the interviews are the following: accessibility to political functions by providing more interpreters; enforcement of federal legislation; provision of captions for local news; lack of understanding by deaf adults of the political system; decreasing the isolation of deaf people; repair of divisions within the deaf community; and more deaf teachers to serve as role models. The interviews raised a number of questions and recommendations for further study. (DB)

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Political Activism and the Deaf Adults

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

What are "politically active" people? They are the ones who vote, sign petitions, join civic organizations, attend public hearings, and write to their legislators. They are also involved in neighborhood and community affairs, attend school functions and meetings, serve on school boards, hold civic offices, lead or serve on various committees. To be politically active, these people stay abreast of the current political issues by reading and watching the news. Knowing the facts is important in being able to participate in the political process.

We live in a "democratic" society which gives all of us the right to be politically active in various ways. Is this true? It has been a known fact that not all Americans have equal opportunity to participate in the political process. The deaf people are one of the several minority groups who have experienced a lack of civic empowerment. They feel that they have little say in the decision-making process that would involve their political, social and economic lives. Is this a pervasive problem in the deaf community? Is it true that many deaf adults feel a sense of civic disenfranchisement?

To give me insights into this issue and also to give me directions in my readings, I interviewed three deaf individuals who have had contacts with other deaf adults in political activities. Their insights proved to be valuable and several of the findings were addressed in the readings I have done.

The following is the actual study:

Introduction

Finding out and learning more about the level of political activity and community action among the deaf adults have been the main focus of my doctorate work. All too often I have heard and read how the deaf adults feel

a sense of civic disenfranchisement or little sense of civic empowerment. Is that true? Why? Is it because of the hearing community? There are no laws that would stand in the way of their becoming fully politically involved in their communities. What are the barriers to their becoming politically active? What are their general attitudes?

Methodology and Description of the Respondents

To find out some possible answers to these questions, I chose an unstructured, open-ended interview approach with three young, college-educated, profoundly deaf men. Their ages range from 23 to 36. Two attended schools for the deaf and one was mainstreamed in a public school program. Two have their bachelor degrees and one has his master's degree. All three use manual communication but one used more ASL (American Sign Language) than the other two. All of them are moderately to very politically active in the deaf community. Each of them was very articulate in expressing their political experiences and opinions.

Before the interviews were started, I had written nine sets of questions to guide my thoughts and possibly guide the interviews. All three interviews became quite unstructured and open-ended. Each of the respondents opened up comfortably and shared their thoughts and experiences freely. The interviews ranged from an hour and a half to two hours each. As they spoke, I recorded their statements as best as I could by jotting down key words, phrases and some significant direct quotations. Later, I categorized the comments to find some of the underlying themes to the issues of political activism of deaf adults. The information they gave me was valuable in providing insight into the problems of the deaf who wish to be involved in politics.

Findings

All three respondents described their experiences in political activities and their interactions with deaf and hearing people. Through these interviews, it became apparent that their experiences and viewpoints were quite similar. They all expressed the issues deaf people face and the limitations or barriers to their becoming fully politically active. It is also apparent that there is much room for growth in the deaf adults' political awareness and attitude. The findings have been organized into the following categories: political issues, barriers to political participation, personal perspectives on the attitude of deaf people.

Political Issues

All of the interviews started with their perspectives of what the political issues are and how the political system could be used to improve the lives of deaf people. The following issues were given:

- Having a statewide relay system
- Having greater TV accessibility
- Having greater accessibility to hearings, political functions by providing more interpreters
- More TTY's in public places
- Establishing a commission of the deaf in the state
- More centralized services (for referrals)
- More legal protection from discrimination
- P.L. 504 -- Is it being enforced?
- Implementing ASL and deaf studies (culture and heritage) in public school curriculums. ASL could be a foreign language alternative
- Improved services for mental health

- Provide smoke alarms in hotels beyond the 3% of the hotel rooms as required by the new law
- TTY's for Medicaid recipients
- Provide captions for local news
- Expand the 911 services by adding more TTY's
- Have county pay for interpreters for political functions
- Training of interpreters in New York State and sign language instruction for instructors in mainstreamed programs
- National relay services in all fifty states

The aforementioned issues are primarily services for the deaf oriented but they are valuable in increasing the deaf people's accessibility to the general services the hearing people take for granted.

Barriers to Political Participation

Each respondent was asked for their thoughts on how politically active they felt most deaf adults have been. All of them shared common themes of communication barriers, isolation and lack of understanding of the political process. Some of the comments were:

- Communication (among the deaf and between the deaf and hearing people)
- Availability of interpreters (not always enough interpreters to assist the deaf people)
- Lack of understanding of the political system
- Poor ability to make themselves understood
- Accessibility of interpreters
- Complexity of the political process, political jargons, lack of education
- Lack of awareness of issues

- They are not part of a political grapevine...other people talk about different candidates, pros and cons, and where they stand on issues
- Deaf people are isolated. They live far apart. There's not a deaf community in the sense there are black communities or Puerto Rican communities.
- The number of deaf people is smaller than that of Blacks, for example. The number is a disadvantage.
- Out of the small number, a very small number have college education
- Many deaf people are not registered voters

All of the respondents felt that the barriers stated are real concerns. There is a need for education of the deaf people as well as the hearing people. More interaction is needed on both sides to improve the political lives of the deaf people.

Personal Perspectives on the Attitudes of Deaf People

The respondents shared their personal thoughts and opinions as to why so many deaf people are not politically active in their communities or have negative attitudes towards politics. One respondent who is quite well known for his political involvement in the deaf community said:

> The deaf community is a divided community...there are divisions among those who are deaf and those who are hard of hearing, those who use ASL and those who use simultaneous communication...between the manual deaf and the oral deaf. There is a lack of identity...a common value or goal. The Jews work together for the liberation of Israel, the blacks work together for equality. What common goal do the deaf people have? Apparently only services (agency) and equipments (TTY) for the deaf.
>
> The deaf community is also very social oriented. Jr. NAD and NAD (National Association of the Deaf) are too social; they don't encourage enough politics, community activity...the deaf people look for free services. They apparently don't look into the areas of education or discrimination very well. They have the 'give me, give me' attitude.

I asked this respondent to share his experiences in working with other deaf people on various political activities. Several of his challenges and frustrations came to light. In letting me know how politically active he is, he said:

> I just wrote a letter to a Monroe County legislator...introduce an ordinance to forbid pit bulls in the county...after learning about the death of that young man.

When asked about other issues he has addressed, he said:

> I worked for improving mental health services for the deaf, forming a commission of the deaf in New York State, getting more smoke alarms in hotels and TTY's for Medicaid people.
>
> I have written to Cuomo, responded to bills and surveys, written to standing committees...It is important to save letters...give the agency a chance to serve the deaf before going to the legislators...'going over their heads'...if fail, they (the letters) serve as proof.

When asked about his experiences in conducting and/or attending meetings with other deaf people, he said:

> It is hard to get the professional deaf and blue collar deaf together. Meeting time is a problem...the '9 to 5' attitude bothers me but a compromise was possible...meet 5:30 to 6:30 ...only 10 people showed up.

He also said he has done committee work and his experiences are:

> Division of labor...people don't do their own work...communication breakdown...they don't share the issues with the deaf community.
>
> Deaf people don't know how to write to or contact legislators ...deaf community focuses on social activities, not education or politics.
>
> I attract (the deaf) like a lightning rod...can't handle them all. I need resource people. Their attitude...you are the leader, you do it for me. They need to say, "how can I help." I'm burned out, take a break, go on hold for 2-3 months then start again.

He also added:

> On August 14, I will give a PAN (Political Action Network) to ESAD (Empire State Association of the Deaf). I want to speak out and ask them what their values are...the deaf need a good shaking to wake them up.
>
> To the outsiders, PAN is already perceived as an influential, powerful growing group, but, actually it is very vulnerable and weak inside because there are too few workers...New York City...where are they? NYC consists nearly half of the number of legislators in Albany. Few of us can't do all the work for them.
>
> I have asked people to go with me to Albany to talk to legislators. Very few were willing to go...maybe two or three.
>
> So often, deaf people don't know what I'm talking about.

I asked him if he had any suggestions for improving the level of political activism among the deaf. He mentioned:

> ...not enough deaf teachers to serve as role models, ...internalized political goals. In the schools for the deaf, have controlled games where the administrators would ask students for their opinions...like where to plant new trees...easy choices but make the students feel more productive.
>
> ...have mock legislatures, visit local and state governments...use the U.S. Constitution as a model (The NSC changes their system almost every year). Teach them how to find information, how to vote, how to register...majority of the older deaf at the RRCD (Rochester Recreation Club for the Deaf) in 1980 didn't know how to register.

The issue of continuing education was raised. I asked him if that might be a solution. He said:

> Use role models, educate each of them, train them and have them go back to their own groups...people will listen to their own members.

Another respondent had similar sentiments about his deaf peers. He said:

> Deaf people take things for granted...look for free services. The manual deaf won't interact with the oral deaf (and vice versa). That is why I stay out of these organizations.
>
> They have a very narrow perspective of things...they only think or do what they believe the other deaf people want them to do.
>
> I have asked some deaf people what they thought of captioned TV programs. The responses I get are 'we want more captioned TV

programs.' No words of thanks or appreciation...they also don't write to NCI (National Captioning Institute) to express their opinion or appreciation.

Unbelievably strong sense of apathy among the deaf people regarding political issues that may affect them. All they talk about are their families, children and gossips.

Deaf people beg and not fight for services. They don't read magazines or newspapers or watch captioned national news. They lack critical thinking skills.

They expect too much from the authorities...they don't see the gray areas, they only see the black and white.

They don't care about issues in education or discrimination. They offered no support when a deaf woman was refused a seat on the jury.

Discussions and Recommendations

From these interviews, concerns about the lack of political activism among the deaf adults surfaced. With only three respondents, I can not make judgments or general statements about the deaf community. These three young men are well-educated, well-informed and have had a variety of political activity experiences. They appeared to stay abreast of current issues by reading the newspapers, a variety of magazines (one respondent mentioned that he likes to read several magazines on a certain topic to get several points of view) and watching captioned news. Still, they would not be considered typical members of the deaf community because of their high levels of education and strong communication skills. Although they may not be a representative sample of a population, their perspectives and comments on the deaf people's attitude toward politics and barriers to political activism warrants further investigation.

Several questions came to my mind from these interviews. They are:

- Is it true that many of the deaf people have little understanding of the political process?
- Is apathy that pervasive in the deaf community?
- Are most of the deaf people poorly informed in current issues?
- Is a feeling of civic disenfranchisement common among the deaf people?
- Is it difficult for them to express ideas and opinions to hearing people?
- Do they feel 'drowned' (as one respondent stated it) so they don't challenge the hearing people?
- Are deaf people afraid to ask for the meaning of legal terms in fear that they would appear 'stupid?'
- Do they feel oppressed and tired of fighting (as a respondent stated it)?
- What are their attitudes toward the professional, more educated deaf people? Do they feel intimidated by them?
- What political issues are important to them?
- Are they members of any civic organizations?
- Why do they belong to a particular organization?
- Are they registered voters? Do they vote? Why?
- How do they feel about the hearing people?
- Do they know who their legislative representatives are?
- Do they know where to get information for various political issues and functions?
- How do they feel about the communication and language skills?
- Do they attend school functions, meetings and community activities?
- Where could they go or what could they do to improve their civic or political knowledge?

This investigation could be continued by having in-depth, open-ended interviews with several deaf, as well as hard of hearing adults. Individuals should be chosen from all levels of educational attainments, ages, males, females, blue and white collar workers, retired, unemployed to see if the patterns found in the original interviews hold true.

I believe that it is essential that any deaf or hearing-impaired person should feel a part of his or her community. A sense of civic empowerment grows when an individual feels that he or she has control of his or her political and social environment.

As mentioned before, several of the findings surfaced in the headings which I found interesting. In a manual developed by the National Academy of Gallaudet University (1984), they opened the chapter titled "Your Participation in the Political Process" by stating:

> Traditionally, hearing impaired people have avoided participation in the political process because of communication difficulties--1) they have been unable to speak directly to and be understood by their political representatives, 2) have had no telephone access to their representatives, and 3) have been unable to understand televised political debates and endorsements. In addition, curricula in schools for the deaf frequently have neglected to teach rights and responsibilities of citizenship in favor of areas such as communication and prevocational skills, which are considered more necessary.
>
> Gradually, these impediments are being overcome, and circumstances are changing. Interpreting services for hearing impaired people are expanding and becoming more professional. The presence of interpreters at important political functions (e.g., the swearing-in ceremony for the President of the United States) has made their use more publically acceptable. More politicians and public service agencies are installing TDD's than ever before, and important televised political addresses have been live-captioned and, thus, accessible to hearing impaired people with decoders.
>
> Legislation for handicapped persons during the last decade has made equal access to education and public services a legal right. However, the present state of the economy has necessitated severe funding cutbacks. Now, although services are promised they cannot always be delivered. At this time it is essential that hearing impaired people let their needs and rights be known to those

persons in political power. If this is not done, their voices will be lost among all those scrambling to secure meager resources.

In the past, hearing impaired people have allowed "in-fighting" (i.e., fighting among smaller factions such as oralists and manualists, or the deaf and hard-of-hearing) to get in the way of presenting a unified front to legislators. Legislators do not respond positively when they receive conflicting reports from different people supposedly representing the same group. It is important for hearing impaired factions to resolve their differences. Indeed, joining forces with organizations of people with other handicapping conditions can provide even greater leverage on issues. There is strength in numbers!

In a speech given by T. Alan Hurwitz, Ed.D. to the members of the Center for Education of Non-Traditional Students, the Deafness Education and Advocacy Foundation and the Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens in Minneapolis, Minnesota (April 25, 1981), he expressed similar sentiments on the importance of deaf people being politically active. He said:

President Reagan wants less intervention in the lives of the people by the federal government. He believes that local and state governments which are much closer to their people should play a larger role in establishing fiscal and programmatic policies. Block Grants are part of the transition from federal government regulation to deregulation of policies and practices to the local and state governments. It is most disturbing that President Reagan is moving very fast. Are we ready to work with our constituencies in our locality to ensure continuity of funding, management and delivery of services to deaf people? Do we have friends in the city government or in the capital of our home state to provide support? Are we in constant contact with them? Do they know what our specific needs are? Do they have the right information to make sound and appropriate decisions for the deaf community? Who are the members of the deaf community? With whom should we work to accomplish our goals? Why should we have state associations of the deaf? What are the critical issues for the future?

Later in his speech, he added:

...we are faced with public officials who have either or both direct and indirect impact on the needs of the deaf community. We may believe that since they are not deaf, they do not have anything to do with the deaf. Not true! They are crucial and imperative members of the deaf community. Why? Because they make legislative and policy decisions on the funding, management and delivery of services to deaf people. Hence, this means we need to interact with these individuals and influence them to make appropriate

decisions. If they have the proper information, they will make appropriate, although difficult decisions. How many of you have friends in the city government or state government? Why should we bother with them if most of our social programs are federally funded, some of you may ask. Remember that President Reagan wants less control on the fiscal policies by the federal government by shifting this responsibility to state and local governments. Block granting allows states and cities to have most of the autonomy on the funding, management and delivery of services to needy people in their area. This means that they are no longer obligated to federal regulations. What are the implications of the Section 504, our civil rights law? This remains to be seen at a later date. Some states may opt to follow the 504 regulations faithfully and other states may ignore them completely. Where does that leave deaf people and other disabled people?

Another example of this component involving public officials are social service agencies. There is a tremendous potential among the existing agencies (e.g., marriage counseling, alcoholism and drug abuse counseling, adoption, unemployment offices, public assistance, employers, driver's education and motor vehicle offices, doctors, lawyers, hospitals, colleges and universities, and others) which can be tapped into providing resources and assistance to deaf people. The problem, of course, is the language and communication barriers between social service providers and deaf clients. Significant efforts have been made to provide these agencies some assistance to develop skills for serving deaf clients through orientation to deafness and sign language training. Many public places are becoming more accessible to the deaf community through telecommunications and interpreting services, yet we still have a long way to go in other places.

Dr. Hurwitz emphasized the need for educating the hearing public of the needs of deaf people and also to let them know of the contributions deaf people have made to society. Deaf people cannot idly sit back and wait for someone to be their advocate or do the work for them. "The deaf community has a tremendous potential to become a viable avenue for upgrading the quality of life of deaf people." (Hurwitz, 1981)

From the interviews and other aforementioned sources, the term "deaf community" became an important concept that should be addressed. It already has been mentioned several times that divisions within the deaf community impede the deaf people's ability to work together to achieve common political goals. According to Brookfield (1981), a community is a group of people with

"shared identity, mutuality and common interest." Can the deaf community be described as a *gemeinschaft* (community) or a *gesellschaft* (association)? Do the deaf people have "shared norms, moral codes, beliefs and attitude"? (Brookfield, 1981) The same author also added that "the community exists when a group of people perceives common needs and problems, acquires a sense of identity, and has a common sense of objectives."

As stated by Dr. Hurwitz and respondents in the interviews, it is apparent that cohesiveness among the deaf people is not strong because of the "social and geographical mobility and plurality of ethnic, class, occupational and interest groups." (Brookfield, 1981) The deaf people of the Rochester area do have the opportunity to join several civic organizations or social clubs for the deaf. They are:

Deaf Women of Rochester (DWR)
Empire State Association of the Deaf (ESAD)
National Association of the Deaf (NAD)
National Fraternal Society of the Deaf (FRAT)
NTID Alumni Chapter of Greater Rochester (NACR)
Monroe County Association for the Hearing Impaired (MCAHI)
Oral Hearing Impaired Section (OHIS)
Rochester Civic Association for the Deaf (RCAD)
Rochester Recreation Club for the Deaf (RRCD)
Rochester School for the Deaf Alumni Association
Rochester Tele-Com Association of the Deaf, Inc. (RTCAD)
(RTCAD, 1986)

Each organization has resources that could be tapped to enhance the social, political and economic lives of the deaf people. Have many deaf people joined any of these organizations? Could these organizations increase the political activism among the deaf? Is it true, as found in the interviews, that these groups tend to be more socially-oriented than politically-oriented? Do these groups work together to encourage cohesiveness among the deaf people and qive them a strong sense of community (gemeinschaft)? Further research would help to answer these questions.

Brookfield (1981) sees "education as the handmaiden of collective political action." He is a strong supporter of community education and learning in community group settings. The aforementioned organizations could offer deaf adults the opportunities to learn about political and social issues, the political process and how to be more politically active. In the same source, Brookfield quoted Marcie Boucouvalas' perception of the relationship between community education and lifelong learning:

> The ultimate goal of community education is the development of self-guiding, self-directed communities which are able to identify and satisfy the needs of all their community members through the coordination, cooperation, and collaboration of all community resources.

Brookfield (1986) mentioned in his most recent work that "assisting community group members to articulate concerns, explore needs, devise action agendas, locate appropriate resources, and implement change are all strongly educational functions." He also added that "this form of education has advantages over many others since the groups are already in existence, participants are motivated, the curriculum is relevant to the participants' lives, and group activities directly address the needs of those adults concerned." With these thoughts in mind, could these community groups for the deaf and community education go hand-in-hand to increase the level of political activism among the deaf adults? Again, further research is needed to find out how active deaf people are in civic organizations, neighborhood associations, schools, church groups and other social and political groups. What types of educational techniques, formally or informally, would they prefer to learn more about the political process, political issues, the needs of their peers?

These questions could be explored by conducting in-depth interviews and asking open-ended questions. This is a qualitative research method.

Brookfield (1981) considered this method to be most appropriate for researching informal learning occurring in community settings because:

1. Understanding such learning depends on the researcher appreciating the norms, values, codes and behaviours of the groups in which it occurs.
2. Recording such learning often relies upon direct observation of learning activities -- sometimes with the researcher also functioning as co-learner.
3. Learners' activities are so idiosyncratic and diverse that they are often unlikely to be amenable to incorporation in pre-coded questionnaire categories.
4. An appreciation of the significance of learning acts can only come when the researcher has gained the trust and confidence of the subject and such an empathy is unlikely to emerge in the conduct of a survey questionnaire.
5. Adopting an emergent categorizations approach to the analysis of data allows those themes and concerns most important to learners to emerge, rather than those considered most important by researchers.
6. Recognizing that learning is occurring may only come after a period of immersion in the culture and activities of learners, particularly since those adults concerned may not consciously identify their activities as 'learning' or 'educational.'

I did not intend to overlook the fact that communication is a major obstacle to the deaf people's full political participation. This issue surfaced in the interviews I conducted and I am sure it will continue to be expressed as a major concern or frustration when further interviews are done. Nora Ellen Groce stated in her book, Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language (1985), that:

> A deaf person's greatest problem is not simply that he or she cannot hear but that the lack of hearing is socially isolating. The deaf person's knowledge and awareness of the larger society are limited because hearing people find it difficult or impossible to communicate with him or her. Even if the deaf person knows sign language, only a small percentage of the hearing population can speak it and can communicate easily with deaf people. The difficulty in communicating, along with the ignorance and misinformation about deafness that is pervasive in most of the hearing world, combine to cause difficulties in all aspects of life for deaf individuals in education, employment, community involvement and civil rights.

It became known through ethno-historical approach (a qualitative approach) that for a period of a little over two hundred years a high rate of profound hereditary deafness existed in the population of Martha's Vineyard (Grace, 1985). Through research of old written records and interviews of the elderly "Vineyarders," Grace found that "the Vineyarders who were born deaf were so thoroughly integrated into the daily life of the community that they were not seen - and did not see themselves - as handicapped or as a group apart." Grace also pointed out that "deaf people were included in all aspects of life...town politics, jobs, church affairs and social life." They voted, held town council offices and participated in debates. Why? As the title says, "everyone spoke sign language" and the communication barriers did not exist.

Could such a wonderful phenomenon happen again? Probably not because of the plurality of our society, a factor that the residents of Martha's Vineyard did not have to deal with until the twentieth century. Still, there are no reasons why the interactions between the deaf and hearing cannot improve. Many factors that have developed in the last five to ten years have been pointing to this direction: more deaf awareness, greater consciousness in the needs of deaf people, greater television accessibility because of captioning, more sign classes and interpreters are available and so on. These help to reduce the communication barriers in gaining information and understanding from both groups. Like the deaf Vineyarders of long ago, deaf people today should have the same sense of civic empowerment and feel a vital part of our political environment.

Recommendations for Further Study:

1. A local television station will be providing real-time captioning for the six o'clock news in the near future. An interview study should be done to investigate the impacts and value of this much needed service to the deaf community. Will they feel more a part of the Rochester community? Will their understanding of the current political and social issues improve? What other changes might they experience in their attitudes toward becoming more politically active?
2. Along with the upcoming real-time captioning services for the local news station, it will also be a presidential election year. Will there be an increase in the number of deaf adults who are registered voters? Because of the captioned news, will the deaf people be more motivated to keep abreast of the issues, read about them, discuss them with others and finally vote?
3. A good number of deaf students in the Rochester area have had the experience of participating in a federally-funded program called the Close Up Foundation in Washington, D.C. This program provided these students the opportunity to observe the workings of the three branches of our government, meet with various legislative, executive and judicial officials and have other hands-on-experiences. Has this experience encouraged the students to be more politically active in their communities? Have they better understood the political process? What are the long range effects, if any, from this experience?
4. An issue that comes up quite often among the deaf leaders is the lack of role models for the young deaf students. As Dr. Hurwitz (1981) expressed in his presentation:

How can we promote better and additional career and leadership opportunities for deaf people? Do we use our deaf role models well during child development stages? Are our young deaf children and their parents aware that we have many excellent role models who are successful professional educators, doctors, nurses, laywers, tool and die makers, printers, programmers, scientists, farmers, engineers, counselors, architects and others? Have our children and parents met and socialized with role models? How can infusion of more role models be fostered in schools and homes of deaf children?

Would listening to the political experiences of these people encourage our young deaf people to become more politically active themselves?

5. The perceptions of hearing people who have had contact with deaf individuals should be heard. It would be worthwhile to interview public officials, lawyers, social service providers and more to find out the experiences they have had in working with deaf people. What suggestions might they have to improve the political lives of the deaf adults? How could communication be improved between the two groups?

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